

Nicotine: A Study on Smoking, Gay Men, and Bar Culture

Smoking has long been a health concern for the global community. According to the CDC, the adverse health effects of smoking account for an estimated 443,000 deaths every year in the USA- one in every five. Populations most impacted by smoking are teenagers, lower-income and lower-education groups, and most importantly for the purpose of my research project, LGBT populations.

A poster in the women's bathroom at Boltini Lounge, a bar in downtown Champaign, inspired the idea for my research project. Although Boltini is not considered a "gay bar", it has long had associations with the LGBT community, mostly through reputation. This poster aimed to raise awareness that smoking in the LGBT community was much more common than the rest of the adult population. I did not remember the exact statistics about it at the time, but upon doing some research, I came across some quite disturbing findings. According to the National Coalition for LGBT Health, LGBT communities are among the populations most impacted by smoking, and are 40-70% more likely to smoke than non-LGBT. In addition to this, in a recent study involving adolescents, it was discovered that 45% of LGBT women and 35% of men engaged in tobacco use, while only 29% of non-LGBT youth smoked. It is widely known that tobacco use is extremely detrimental to health; the American Cancer Society estimates that over 30,000 LGBT persons die each year due to tobacco-related diseases.

I had never explicitly thought about how much more common smoking is within the LGBT community. However, upon reflecting, I realized that I had definitely noticed a lot of smokers when I would go out to gay bars, and in addition,

a lot of my LGBT-identifying friends were smokers. This became the basis of my research project.

My original research questions were as follows:

1. In what ways does identifying as LGBT/Q at UIUC influence a person's decision to smoke?
2. Is smoking more common in the LGBT/Q population at UIUC, at if yes, why is that? Are there external forces at work here, and if yes, what are they?
3. What are the attitudes of LGBT/Q people towards smoking as well as smoking cessation in comparison with the rest of the population?

However, as my research progressed, I realized that I was only interviewing gay men. In addition, something that came up a lot during my interviews was the significant influence of bar culture on smoking, and so I decided to integrate this into my research. My revised research questions are the following:

1. How is smoking related to gay men at UIUC and the bar culture that surrounds them?
2. If smoking is more common within the gay community, why is it that they smoke? What keeps them smoking?
3. What factors influence their decision to not smoke?

My research method involved conducting four interviews with men who identified as gay. I found my interviewees through my social network- they were people that I was already friends with, or were friends with other people I knew. Three of them were smokers, and one of them was a nonsmoker. I gave the

pseudonyms Tony, Rob and Andrew to the smokers, and the pseudonym John to the nonsmoker.

Tony is a Caucasian gay man who is 24 years old, and attending law school at the University of Illinois. He is from out-of-state, and grew up in a strict Mormon family. He did not start smoking up until he was 23 years old, and he also did not start smoking within the gay community, however, he kept smoking within the gay community. When he first started smoking, he bummed cigarettes off other people for the first 6-9 months, and only started buying his own packs after that. Tony became a true smoker when he started becoming more exposed to the gay community and started going out to the bars more. He has more friends that smoke than don't and most of his friends in the Champaign-Urbana area are gay. His friends are also very social and go out to the bars a lot, and according to him, smoking is part of the partying scene. As he claimed, "Other gay people smoking is what makes me smoke." Smoking, therefore, allows him to fit into his clique.

Tony is ashamed of being a smoker:

"I don't like it at all. I don't like the way it appears, I hide it from people that don't smoke, um, I don't tell people I'm a smoker, I try to cover it up like you know, by spraying myself with cologne, lotioning my hands, washing my hands, brushing my teeth all the time, because I don't like anybody to know that I smoke."

Tony related that he felt this way because of his image within the gay community as being "very health-conscious" and "going to the gym a lot". He also said that he had always perceived smokers as being "dirty, unkempt and unhealthy", but did not think that he could be so harsh anymore because he himself was now a smoker.

Tony has tried to quit multiple times in the past year, however has failed to do so because he has found that every time he tries to quit smoking, he puts on weight.

"I am able to fight off cigarette cravings really easily, but I find that I put on weight so quickly, and I want to eat all the time when I quit smoking, it makes it so much harder for me to stay on a diet, and for me right now, I feel like that's what I value more unfortunately than quitting smoking, like I have nothing pressing on me to quit smoking, like I know I cant see my lungs whereas I can see the outside of my body."

Smoking, therefore, has become more than just a partying substance for Tony. It has turned into an addiction because he uses it as an appetite suppressant. According to Remafedi, "Regarding hunger, participants noted that cigarettes suppress appetite at a smaller price than food. Cigarettes thus might be used for weight control" (Remafedi, S69). Tony ideally wants to quit before he finishes law school, which is quite soon- however, whether he will be able to or not is under question.

Andrew is also a Caucasian man who identifies as gay, and is 23 years old. He is an alumnus of the University of Illinois who graduated last year, and has stayed on here in Champaign. He is originally from a town in central Illinois close to Springfield. Andrew was about twenty years old when he started smoking, but his first cigarette was when he was much younger. He recalls being with his neighbor hiding out in their garage, and smoking cigarettes that he had stolen from his dad. He continued occasionally smoking in social settings, up until about two years ago when he started buying his own packs. This was around the time Andrew started dating a guy who was a smoker, and started going to the gay bar C Street a lot. He

was also working at a restaurant at the time, and claimed that everyone who works in a restaurant smokes. About six months after Andrew started dating this guy, he started buying his own packs. They are not dating anymore, however, Andrew is still a smoker.

Andrew claims that most of his friends are smokers, and most of them are gay.

"I know I spend my time with smokers more than non-smokers. I don't know if that's because we share the same lifestyle of going out more and smoking and maybe that helps us carry on the habit."

He also thinks that the nonsmokers in the LGBT community are a different subset of the population- or maybe that the smokers in the LGBT community are.

"I'd say that the non-smokers in the LGBT community are more health-oriented in general, aren't people in general who are regular drinkers, aren't always about partying, just different life habits in general. I mean, all my gay friends that smoke, we all go out regularly and we all smoke regularly and we all drink regularly, and...I feel like we focus more on the enjoyment of going out and being around each other more so than like staying at home by ourselves and watching movies."

In addition, just by virtue of smoking, Andrew thinks it is much easier to fit into certain spaces, especially gay bars like C Street. It also makes it easier to talk to other people, and meet new people. Because the gay population in Champaign is so small, smoking is a way that gay men can meet other gay men, as it instantly gives them something in common and something to talk about.

"It makes you have something in common, and makes you have a reason to go outside together again!"

Andrew also claimed that here at the University of Illinois and in the Champaign-Urbana area, he has noticed that there are more gay men that like to smoke and drink than there are those that don't.

"At the U of I, I've noticed that there are way more of the smoking gay people who choose to not work out as opposed to the ones who are obsessed with their appearance (you know there is that stereotype of gay men being obsessed with their appearance, but I associate that with something that I would see more of if say I lived in Chicago or something, but at the U of I specifically, I see way more of a smoking population that does not work out, at least in terms of the gay people I know, in general."

This is quite an interesting observation. A lot more work would need to be done to really assess the validity of this statement, and if it is found to be true, more research should be done to determine what exactly it is about Champaign-Urbana and the University of Illinois that contributes to this phenomenon. According to Remafedi, "alcohol consumption, being away from supervision at home and school, and offers of cigarettes from others" were triggers for cigarette smoking (Remafedi, S69). It would be interesting to see whether these factors are some of the major reasons why more gay people engage in tobacco use at UIUC.

Rob is also a Caucasian male who identifies as gay. Rob is a senior here at the University of Illinois who is graduating in May this year, is 22 years old, and is from a suburb of Chicago. He is also a smoker, and claims that he is addicted. Rob did not start smoking within the gay community, however. His first cigarette was in high school at a party, but he only liked them when he was drinking- sober cigarettes would disgust him. However, he started to enjoy smoking sober when he was

studying abroad in Prague, as most of his study abroad group smoked cigarettes, and smoking cigarettes indoors was legal in Prague- you can smoke anywhere and everywhere. Although he picked up this habit in Europe, he continued on smoking when he returned to the US, and a major reason for this was that his roommates were both smokers. In addition, all of the people he associates with are smokers- and almost all of the people he is friends with are gay.

Rob, like Andrew, thinks that one of the major reasons he continues smoking is because it is much easier to meet new people just by virtue of smoking.

"In a way, that's been an excuse not to quit. It's so much fun. Like you meet a particular kind of person and you have a special bond because you're both smokers and that's the minority in the bar. I even got my summer internship by meeting a girl in a bar smoking!"

Rob has noticed that most of the smoking that goes on around this campus is at the bars, and around alcoholic settings. According to Remafedi, "Socializing in smoky venues offers easy access to cigarettes and alcohol and a conversation piece, gives the impression that smoking is acceptable and permissible, fosters norms of smoking, and makes cessation difficult" (Remafedi, S69). Rob believes that even at straight bars, there is a higher percentage of LGBT-identifying people that are smoking than non-LGBT. Another realization that he had during our interview was that all of his friends here at school smoke and are all gay, whereas none of his friends at home smoke, and all of them are straight. When I asked him about why he thought that smoking was more common within the LGBT population, and especially around the bar culture, he responded with the following:

"In my personal opinion, if I'm at a straight bar with my gay friends, there is safety in groups, and if you go outside to have a cigarette and you're in a group, you excommunicate everyone else. If you're feeling uncomfortable...like it's rare, but that just transcends into...going outside to smoke cigarettes."

This was a particularly important finding for me. The LGBT population has long been marginalized, and it seems that smoking has been a way for subsets of the population to distinguish their identity. In addition, the shared habit of smoking allows them to make up their own group, and in this way, they are able to cope with the discriminatory forces that are at work on this campus. This is obviously not conclusive evidence, but it would be interesting to learn more about this idea.

John was the only non-smoker I interviewed. John is an African-American male who also identifies as gay. He is a senior at the University of Illinois, and is graduating in May as well. He is also 22 years old, and is from a suburb of Chicago. I decided that it was important to also include a non-smoker in my research, as it is important to distinguish the factors that influence a gay man to choose not to smoke, as it provides a comparative basis. For John, the choice to not smoke had been made long ago.

"I think I'm so against it because my neighbor, she passed away because of lung cancer, and she didn't even smoke but one of her family members did, and my mom was really close to her and I saw how upset my mom was because of this, and I thought, I never want to put my family through that, or have a friend that I lose to lung cancer so I think probably that was another reason I don't want to smoke, and plus, I'm really into working out and stuff, so that in itself."

John is really into sports as well, and thinks that smoking is a disgusting habit. He once dated a smoker, however, was really against it, and as he said humorously, “I don’t want to French-kiss an ashtray”. However, this does not mean that he hasn’t tried smoking before. In fact, his last smoking experience was around gay men in San Francisco, and in an intoxicated state. He claimed that he really liked it at the time and thought that he was really “cool” for it, however, woke up the next morning and felt disgusting. When I asked him why he think he did it, he responded with the following:

“I think, just in the heat of the moment, and around all these people, around all these attractive gay guys who were smoking and we wanted to be included in their circle.”

Smoking definitely seems to facilitate inclusion within groups. As it is so prevalent within the gay community, it is often used as a means to fit into a particular space, and a particular clique that one wants to be identified with. This is especially noticeable around the bar culture. As the social scene at UIUC also heavily depends on the bar culture, it is not surprising that so many gay men at this school and in Champaign-Urbana engage in it, and therefore become smokers. In my opinion, the heavy emphasis on drinking culture is a huge factor in the prevalence of gay smokers on this campus.

John, unlike the other smokers, mostly associates with people that don’t smoke, work out, eat right, and limit their alcohol consumption. According to Remafedi, “By far, the most common avoidance strategy familiar to youths was simply to refuse to smoke. Some individuals actively avoided smoking and said they date only

nonsmokers. Although refusal strategies also were mentioned by four of the interactors, they more commonly listed exercising will power, caring for health and appearance, participating in athletic activities, creating social norms of nonsmoking” (Remafedi, S69). John’s common bond with his friends is fitness, not smoking, unlike the other gay smokers I interviewed. However, even though he is not a smoker, John has also noticed that smoking is quite common within the gay community here at UIUC, and in his opinion, bars assist tobacco use in implicit ways.

“I’m thinking of Emerald City, they have a section outside, and granted everybody does, but then they actually have ashtrays that they put out there and they clean them every night, and they make it so like if it’s cold outside you can stand under this little tent thing, and be warm and smoke your cigarette, and there’s like a bunch of them. And they also have a designated lighted patio area for it so I think that bars make it easy for smokers to have a cigarette or to go outside and smoke.”

Originally, my research plan had included interviewing a manager at C Street, to find out if the smoking ban had an impact on bar patronage, and if smoking trends within the bar had changed due to it. However, although I made many attempts to talk to them, I was unable to secure an interview. In addition, time constraints made it impossible to include this into my research, but I believe that this could have been a really important element of my research.

According to published research, “GLB¹ students at colleges with more comprehensive resources for GLBs will be less likely to use substances than their counterparts at colleges with fewer resources, and GLB students at colleges where substance use is more prevalent among all students will be more likely to smoke

and binge drink than those at colleges where use of these substances is less common” (Eisenberg, 1914). In addition, “Prior research has demonstrated that the size of one's social network and the amount of time spent socializing with friends is positively associated with substance use among college students” (Eisenberg 1920). This can be related quite directly to my research- UIUC is a school where substance use is prevalent among all students, and although there are resources in place for LGBT students, it does not seem that these resources are being utilized as much as they should be. In addition, according to Remafedi, “historically, LGBT people have socialized in venues, such as bars, where smoking is prevalent” (Remafedi, S65), and this solidifies the argument that bar culture is a huge reason for smoking being quite common within the LGBT community.

In conclusion, the many factors that seem to influence smoking within the LGBT community can be summarized into peer pressure, using it as an appetite suppressant, using smoking as a means of inclusion, frequenting bars and other settings where alcohol use is rampant, the stress of identifying as LGBT, dating other smokers, and being rebellious. In keeping with the aforementioned research, more substance-free venues need to be created in order for the LGBT population to have places to congregate in which do not promote tobacco use. In addition, there need to be more programs dedicated to raising awareness about the detrimental effects of alcohol and tobacco use, and the vulnerability of the LGBT population to these products.